Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

The Triumph of Life

Swift as a spirit hastening to his task
Of glory & of good, the Sun sprang forth
Rejoicing in his splendour, & the mask
Of darkness fell from the awakened Earth.
The smokeless altars of the mountain snows
Flamed above crimson clouds, & at the birth
Of light, the Ocean's orison arose
To which the birds tempered their matin lay,
All flowers in field or forest which unclose
Their trembling eyelids to the kiss of day,
Swinging their censers in the element,
With orient incense lit by the new ray
Burned slow & inconsumably, & sent
Their odorous sighs up to the smiling air,
And in succession due, did Continent,
Isle, Ocean, & all things that in them wear
The form & character of mortal mould
Rise as the Sun their father rose, to bear
Their portion of the toil which he of old
Took as his own & then imposed on them;
But I, whom thoughts which must remain untold
Had kept as wakeful as the stars that gem
The cone of night, now they were laid asleep,
Stretched my faint limbs beneath the hoary stem
Which an old chestnut flung athwart the steep
Of a green Apennine: before me fled
The night; behind me rose the day; the Deep
Was at my feet, & Heaven above my head
When a strange trance over my fancy grew
Which was not slumber, for the shade it spread
Was so transparent that the scene came through
As clear as when a veil of light is drawn
O'er evening hills they glimmer; and I knew
That I had felt the freshness of that dawn,
Bathed in the same cold dew my brow & hair
And sate as thus upon that slope of lawn
Under the self same bough, & heard as there
The birds, the fountains & the Ocean hold
Sweet talk in music through the enamoured air.
And then a Vision on my brain was rolled.

As in that trance of wondrous thought I lay
This was the tenour of my waking dream.
Methought I sate beside a public way

Thick strewn with summer dust, & a great stream
Of people there was hurrying to & fro
Numerous as gnats upon the evening gleam,
All hastening onward, yet none seemed to know
Whither he went, or whence he came, or why
He made one of the multitude, yet so
Was borne amid the crowd as through the sky
One of the million leaves of summer's bier.--
Old age & youth, manhood & infancy,
Mixed in one mighty torrent did appear,
Some flying from the thing they feared & some
Seeking the object of another's fear,
And others as with steps towards the tomb
Pored on the trodden worms that crawled beneath,
And others mournfully within the gloom
Of their own shadow walked, and called it death ...
And some fled from it as it were a ghost,
Half fainting in the affliction of vain breath.
But more with motions which each other crost
Pursued or shunned the shadows the clouds threw
Or birds within the noonday ether lost,
Upon that path where flowers never grew;
And weary with vain toil & faint for thirst
Heard not the fountains whose melodious dew
Out of their mossy cells forever burst
Nor felt the breeze which from the forest told
Of grassy paths, & wood lawns interspersed
With overarching elms & caverns cold,
And violet banks where sweet dreams brood, but they
Pursued their serious folly as of old ....
And as I gazed methought that in the way
The throng grew wilder, as the woods of June
When the South wind shakes the extinguished day.--
And a cold glare, intenser than the noon
But icy cold, obscured with [[blank]] light
The Sun as he the stars. Like the young moon
When on the sunlit limits of the night
Her white shell trembles amid crimson air
And whilst the sleeping tempest gathers might
Doth, as a herald of its coming, bear
The ghost of her dead Mother, whose dim form
Bends in dark ether from her infant's chair,
So came a chariot on the silent storm
Of its own rushing splendour, and a Shape
So sate within as one whom years deform
Beneath a dusky hood & double cape
Crouching within the shadow of a tomb,
And o'er what seemed the head, a cloud like crape,
Was bent a dun & faint etherial gloom
Tempering the light; upon the chariot's beam
A Janus-visaged Shadow did assume
The guidance of that wonder-winged team.

The Shapes which drew it in thick lightnings
Were lost: I heard alone on the air's soft stream
The music of their ever moving wings.
All the four faces of that charioteer
Had their eyes banded . . . little profit brings
Speed in the van & blindness in the rear,
Nor then avail the beams that quench the Sun
Or that his banded eyes could pierce the sphere
Of all that is, has been, or will be done.--
So ill was the car guided, but it past
With solemn speed majestically on . . .
The crowd gave way, & I arose aghast,
Or seemed to rise, so mighty was the trance,
And saw like clouds upon the thunder blast
The million with fierce song and maniac dance
Raging around; such seemed the jubilee
As when to greet some conqueror's advance
Imperial Rome poured forth her living sea
From senatehouse & prison & theatre
When Freedom left those who upon the free
Had bound a yoke which soon they stooped to bear.
Nor wanted here the true similitude
Of a triumphal pageant, for where'er
The chariot rolled a captive multitude
Was driven; althose who had grown old in power
Or misery,--all who have their age subdued,
By action or by suffering, and whose hour
Was drained to its last sand in weal or woe,
So that the trunk survived both fruit & flower;
All those whose fame or infamy must grow
Till the great winter lay the form & name
Of their own earth with them forever low,
All but the sacred few who could not tame
Their spirits to the Conqueror, but as soon
As they had touched the world with living flame
Fled back like eagles to their native noon,
Of those who put aside the diadem
Of earthly thrones or gems, till the last one
Were there;--for they of Athens & Jerusalem
Were neither mid the mighty captives seen
Nor mid the ribald crowd that followed them
Or fled before . . Now swift, fierce & obscene
The wild dance maddens in the van, & those
Who lead it, fleet as shadows on the green,
Outspeed the chariot & without repose
Mix with each other in tempestuous measure
To savage music .... Wilder as it grows,
They, tortured by the agonizing pleasure,
Convulsed & on the rapid whirlwinds spun
Of that fierce spirit, whose unholy leisure
Was soothed by mischief since the world begun,
Throw back their heads & loose their streaming hair,

And in their dance round her who dims the Sun
Maidens & youths fling their wild arms in air
As their feet twinkle; they recede, and now
Bending within each other's atmosphere
Kindle invisibly; and as they glow
Like moths by light attracted & repelled,
Oft to new bright destruction come & go.
Till like two clouds into one vale impelled
That shake the mountains when their lightnings mingle
And die in rain,--the fiery band which held
Their natures, snaps . . . ere the shock cease to tingle
One falls and then another in the path
Senseless, nor is the desolation single,
Yet ere I can say *where* the chariot hath
Past over them; nor other trace I find
But as of foam after the Ocean's wrath
Is spent upon the desert shore.--Behind,
Old men, and women foully disarrayed
Shake their grey hair in the insulting wind,
Limp in the dance & strain, with limbs decayed,
Seeking to reach the light which leaves them still
Farther behind & deeper in the shade.
But not the less with impotence of will
They wheel, though ghastly shadows interpose
Round them & round each other, and fulfill
Their work and to the dust whence they arose
Sink & corruption veils them as they lie
And frost in these performs what fire in those.
Struck to the heart by this sad pageantry,
Half to myself I said, "And what is this?
Whose shape is that within the car? & why"-
I would have added--"is all here amiss?"
But a voice answered . . "Life" . . . I turned & knew
(O Heaven have mercy on such wretchedness!)
That what I thought was an old root which grew
To strange distortion out of the hill side
Was indeed one of that deluded crew,
And that the grass which methought hung so wide
And white, was but his thin discoloured hair,
And that the holes it vainly sought to hide
Were or had been eyes.--"lf thou canst forbear
To join the dance, which I had well forborne,"
Said the grim Feature, of my thought aware,
"I will now tell that which to this deep scorn
Led me & my companions, and relate
The progress of the pageant since the morn;
"If thirst of knowledge doth not thus abate,
Follow it even to the night, but I
Am weary" . . . Then like one who with the weight
Of his own words is staggered, wearily
He paused, and ere he could resume, I cried,
"First who art thou?" . . . "Before thy memory

"I feared, loved, hated, suffered, did, & died,
And if the spark with which Heaven lit my spirit
Earth had with purer nutriment supplied
"Corruption would not now thus much inherit
Of what was once Rousseau--nor this disguise
Stained that within which still disdains to wear it.--
"If I have been extinguished, yet there rise
A thousand beacons from the spark I bore."--
"And who are those chained to the car?" "The Wise,
"The great, the unforgotten: they who wore
Mitres & helms & crowns, or wreathes of light,
Signs of thought's empire over thought; their lore
"Taught them not this--to know themselves; their might
Could not repress the mutiny within,
And for the morn of truth they feigned, deep night
"Caught them ere evening." "Who is he with chin
Upon his breast and hands crost on his chain?"
"The Child of a fierce hour; he sought to win
"The world, and lost all it did contain
Of greatness, in its hope destroyed; & more
Of fame & peace than Virtue's self can gain
"Without the opportunity which bore
Him on its eagle's pinion to the peak
From which a thousand climbers have before
"Fall'n as Napoleon fell."--I felt my cheek
Alter to see the great form pass away
Whose grasp had left the giant world so weak
That every pigmy kicked it as it lay--
And much I grieved to think how power & will
In opposition rule our mortal day--
And why God made irreconcilable
Good & the means of good; and for despair
I half disdained mine eye's desire to fill
With the spent vision of the times that were
And scarce have ceased to be . . . "Dost thou behold,"
Said then my guide, "those spoilers spoiled, Voltaire,
"Frederic, & Kant, Catherine, & Leopold,
Chained hoary anarch, demagogue & sage
Whose name the fresh world thinks already old--
"For in the battle Life & they did wage
She remained conqueror--I was overcome
By my own heart alone, which neither age
"Nor tears nor infamy nor now the tomb
Could temper to its object."--"Let them pass"--
I cried--"the world & its mysterious doom
"Is not so much more glorious than it was
That I desire to worship those who drew
New figures on its false & fragile glass
"As the old faded."--"Figures ever new
Rise on the bubble, paint them how you may;
We have but thrown, as those before us threw,
"Our shadows on it as it past away.

But mark, how chained to the triumphal chair
The mighty phantoms of an elder day--
"All that is mortal of great Plato there
Expiates the joy & woe his master knew not;
That star that ruled his doom was far too fair--
"And Life, where long that flower of Heaven grew not,
Conquered the heart by love which gold or pain
Or age or sloth or slavery could subdue not--
"And near [[blank]] walk the [[blank]] twain,
The tutor & his pupil, whom Dominion
Followed as tame as vulture in a chain.--
"The world was darkened beneath either pinion
Of him whom from the flock of conquerors
Fame singled as her thunderbearing minion;
"The other long outlived both woes & wars,
Throned in new thoughts of men, and still had kept
The jealous keys of truth's eternal doors
"If Bacon's spirit [[blank]] had not leapt
Like lightning out of darkness; he compelled
The Proteus shape of Nature's as it slept
"To wake & to unbar the caves that held
The treasure of the secrets of its reign--
See the great bards of old who inly quelled
"The passions which they sung, as by their strain
May well be known: their living melody
Tempers its own contagion to the vein
"Of those who are infected with it--I
Have suffered what I wrote, or viler pain!--
"And so my words were seeds of misery--
Even as the deeds of others."--"Not as theirs,"
I said--he pointed to a company
In which I recognized amid the heirs
Of Caesar's crime from him to Constantine,
The Anarchs old whose force & murderous snares
Had founded many a sceptre bearing line
And spread the plague of blood & gold abroad,
And Gregory & John and men divine
Who rose like shadows between Man & god
Till that eclipse, still hanging under Heaven,
Was worshipped by the world o'er which they strode
For the true Sun it quenched.--"Their power was given
But to destroy," replied the leader--"I
Am one of those who have created, even
"If it be but a world of agony."--
"Whence camest thou & whither goest thou?
How did thy course begin," I said, "& why?
"Mine eyes are sick of this perpetual flow
Of people, & my heart of one sad thought.--
Speak."--"Whence I came, partly I seem to know,
"And how & by what paths I have been brought
To this dread pass, methinks even thou mayst guess;
Why this should be my mind can compass not;

"Whither the conqueror hurries me still less.
But follow thou, & from spectator turn
Actor or victim in this wretchedness,
"And what thou wouldst be taught I then may learn
From thee.--Now listen . . . In the April prime
When all the forest tops began to burn
"With kindling green, touched by the azure clime
Of the young year, I found myself asleep
Under a mountain which from unknown time
"Had yawned into a cavern high & deep,
And from it came a gentle rivulet
Whose water like clear air in its calm sweep
"Bent the soft grass & kept for ever wet
The stems of the sweet flowers, and filled the grove
With sound which all who hear must needs forget
"All pleasure & all pain, all hate & love,
Which they had known before that hour of rest:
A sleeping mother then would dream not of
"The only child who died upon her breast
At eventide, a king would mourn no more
The crown of which his brow was dispossest
"When the sun lingered o'er the Ocean floor
To gild his rival's new prosperity.--
Thou wouldst forget thus vainly to deplore
"Ills, which if ills, can find no cure from thee,
The thought of which no other sleep will quell
Nor other music blot from memory--
"So sweet & deep is the oblivious spell.--
Whether my life had been before that sleep
The Heaven which I imagine, or a Hell
"Like this harsh world in which I wake to weep,
I know not. I arose & for a space
The scene of woods & waters seemed to keep,
"Though it was now broad day, a gentle trace
Of light diviner than the common Sun
Sheds on the common Earth, but all the place
"Was filled with many sounds woven into one
Oblivious melody, confusing sense
Amid the gliding waves & shadows dun;
"And as I looked the bright omnipresence
Of morning through the orient cavern flowed,
And the Sun's image radiantly intense
"Burned on the waters of the well that glowed
Like gold, and threaded all the forest maze
With winding paths of emerald fire--there stood
"Amid the sun, as he amid the blaze
Of his own glory, on the vibrating
Floor of the fountain, paved with flashing rays,
"A shape all light, which with one hand did fling
Dew on the earth, as if she were the Dawn
Whose invisible rain forever seemed to sing
"A silver music on the mossy lawn,

And still before her on the dusky grass
Iris her many coloured scarf had drawn.--
"In her right hand she bore a crystal glass
Mantling with bright Nepenthe;--the fierce splendour
Fell from her as she moved under the mass
"Of the deep cavern, & with palms so tender
Their tread broke not the mirror of its billow,
Glided along the river, and did bend her
"Head under the dark boughs, till like a willow
Her fair hair swept the bosom of the stream
That whispered with delight to be their pillow.--
"As one enamoured is upborne in dream
O'er lily-paven lakes mid silver mist
To wondrous music, so this shape might seem
"Partly to tread the waves with feet which kist
The dancing foam, partly to glide along
The airs that roughened the moist amethyst,
"Or the slant morning beams that fell among
The trees, or the soft shadows of the trees;
And her feet ever to the ceaseless song
"Of leaves & winds & waves & birds & bees
And falling drops moved in a measure new
Yet sweet, as on the summer evening breeze
"Up from the lake a shape of golden dew
Between two rocks, athwart the rising moon,
Moves up the east, where eagle never flew.--
"And still her feet, no less than the sweet tune
To which they moved, seemed as they moved, to blot
The thoughts of him who gazed on them, & soon
"All that was seemed as if it had been not,
As if the gazer's mind was strewn beneath
Her feet like embers, & she, thought by thought,
"Trampled its fires into the dust of death,
As Day upon the threshold of the east
Treads out the lamps of night, until the breath
"Of darkness reillumines even the least
Of heaven's living eyes--like day she came,
Making the night a dream; and ere she ceased
"To move, as one between desire and shame
Suspended, I said--'If, as it doth seem,
Thou comest from the realm without a name,
" 'Into this valley of perpetual dream,
Shew whence I came, and where I am, and why--
Pass not away upon the passing stream.'
" 'Arise and quench thy thirst,' was her reply,
And as a shut lily, stricken by the wand
Of dewy morning's vital alchemy,
"I rose; and, bending at her sweet command,
Touched with faint lips the cup she raised,
And suddenly my brain became as sand
"Where the first wave had more than half erased
The track of deer on desert Labrador,

Whilst the fierce wolf from which they fled amazed
"Leaves his stamp visibly upon the shore
Until the second bursts--so on my sight
Burst a new Vision never seen before.--
"And the fair shape waned in the coming light
As veil by veil the silent splendour drops
From Lucifer, amid the chrysolite
"Of sunrise ere it strike the mountain tops--
And as the presence of that fairest planet
Although unseen is felt by one who hopes
"That his day's path may end as he began it
In that star's smile, whose light is like the scent
Of a jonquil when evening breezes fan it,
"Or the soft note in which his dear lament
The Brescian shepherd breathes, or the caress
That turned his weary slumber to content.--
"So knew I in that light's severe excess
The presence of that shape which on the stream
Moved, as I moved along the wilderness,
"More dimly than a day appearing dream,
The ghost of a forgotten form of sleep
A light from Heaven whose half extinguished beam
"Through the sick day in which we wake to weep
Glimmers, forever sought, forever lost.--
So did that shape its obscure tenour keep
"Beside my path, as silent as a ghost;
But the new Vision, and its cold bright car,
With savage music, stunning music, crost
"The forest, and as if from some dread war
Triumphantly returning, the loud million
Fiercely extolled the fortune of her star.--
"A moving arch of victory the vermilion
And green & azure plumes of Iris had
Built high over her wind-winged pavilion,
"And underneath aetherial glory clad
The wilderness, and far before her flew
The tempest of the splendour which forbade
Shadow to fall from leaf or stone;--the crew
Seemed in that light like atomies that dance
Within a sunbeam.--Some upon the new
"Embroidery of flowers that did enhance
The grassy vesture of the desart, played,
Forgetful of the chariot's swift advance;
"Others stood gazing till within the shade
Of the great mountain its light left them dim.--
Others outspeeded it, and others made
"Circles around it like the clouds that swim
Round the high moon in a bright sea of air,
And more did follow, with exulting hymn,
"The chariot & the captives fettered there,
But all like bubbles on an eddying flood
Fell into the same track at last & were

"Borne onward.--I among the multitude
Was swept; me sweetest flowers delayed not long,
Me not the shadow nor the solitude,
"Me not the falling stream's Lethean song,
Me, not the phantom of that early form
Which moved upon its motion,--but among
"The thickest billows of the living storm
I plunged, and bared my bosom to the clime
Of that cold light, whose airs too soon deform.--
"Before the chariot had begun to climb
The opposing steep of that mysterious dell,
Behold a wonder worthy of the rhyme
"Of him whom from the lowest depths of Hell
Through every Paradise & through all glory
Love led serene, & who returned to tell
"In words of hate & awe the wondrous story
How all things are transfigured, except Love;
For deaf as is a sea which wrath makes hoary
"The world can hear not the sweet notes that move
The sphere whose light is melody to lovers---
A wonder worthy of his rhyme--the grove
"Grew dense with shadows to its inmost covers,
The earth was grey with phantoms, & the air
Was peopled with dim forms, as when there hovers
"A flock of vampire-bats before the glare
Of the tropic sun, bring ere evening
Strange night upon some Indian isle,--thus were
"Phantoms diffused around, & some did fling
Shadows of shadows, yet unlike themselves,
Behind them, some like eaglets on the wing
"Were lost in the white blaze, others like elves
Danced in a thousand unimagined shapes
Upon the sunny streams & grassy shelves;
"And others sate chattering like restless apes
On vulgar paws and voluble like fire.
Some made a cradle of the ermined capes
"Of kingly mantles, some upon the tiar
Of pontiffs sate like vultures, others played
Within the crown which girt with empire
"A baby's or an idiot's brow, & made
Their nests in it; the old anatomies
Sate hatching their bare brood under the shade
"Of demon wings, and laughed from their dead eyes
To reassume the delegated power
Arrayed in which these worms did monarchize
"Who make this earth their charnel.--Others more
Humble, like falcons sate upon the fist
Of common men, and round their heads did soar,
"Or like small gnats & flies, as thick as mist
On evening marshes, thronged about the brow
Of lawyer, statesman, priest & theorist,
"And others like discoloured flakes of snow

512On fairest bosoms & the sunniest hair
513Fell, and were melted by the youthful glow
514"Which they extinguished; for like tears, they were
515A veil to those from whose faint lids they rained
516In drops of sorrow.--I became aware
517"Of whence those forms proceeded which thus stained
518The track in which we moved; after brief space
519From every form the beauty slowly waned,
520"From every firmest limb & fairest face
521The strength & freshness fell like dust, & left
522The action & the shape without the grace
523"Of life; the marble brow of youth was cleft
524With care, and in the eyes where once hope shone
525Desire like a lioness bereft
526"Of its last cub, glared ere it died; each one
527Of that great crowd sent forth incessantly
528These shadows, numerous as the dead leaves blown
529"In Autumn evening from a popular tree--
530Each, like himself & like each other were,
531At first, but soon distorted, seemed to be
532"Obscure clouds moulded by the casual air;
533And of this stuff the car's creative ray
534Wrought all the busy phantoms that were there
535"As the sun shapes the clouds--thus, on the way
536Mask after mask fell from the countenance
537And form of all, and long before the day
538"Was old, the joy which waked like Heaven's glance
539The sleepers in the oblivious valley, died,
540And some grew weary of the ghastly dance
541"And fell, as I have fallen by the way side,
542Those soonest from whose forms most shadows past
543And least of strength & beauty did abide."--
544"Then, what is Life?" I said . . . the cripple cast
545His eye upon the car which now had rolled
546Onward, as if that look must be the last,
547And answered .... "Happy those for whom the fold
548Of ...

Notes

1] Begun in the spring of 1822, unfinished at the time of Shelley's death on July 8, and first published in *Posthumous Poems* (1824) from a MS. (now in the Bodleian library), whose corrections, omitted words, passages of unrevised improvisation, difficult hand, and long inaccessibility have so far prevented much certainty in the establishment of a text. The reference to Dante's *Divine Comedy* in lines 471-76 and to Petrarch's *Triumphs* in the title (both of which, like *The Triumph of Life*, are written in terza rima stanzas) suggests two probable models for the poem.

132-34] Mary Shelley's text seems impossible, but no textual authority has been adduced for amending it. Misreading or miswriting of some kind must be responsible for that apparently parallel, but conflicting, pair, "were there" and "were neither." W. M. Rossetti makes some sense out of the passage by amending "or" in 132 to "for" and "were there" in 134 to "whether", and by placing a semi-colon at the end of 131.

134] Of Athens or Jerusalem. Commentators assume that the renouncing figures of which Shelley is thinking are Socrates in Athens and Jesus in Jerusalem. But the corruption of the text here makes

any interpretation doubtful.

190] Grim Feature: a reminiscence of *Paradise Lost*, X, 279, where it represents Death and carries the Latin meaning of "factura" or "creature."

204] Rousseau. Compare Byron's portrait of Rousseau in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, III, lxxvii-lxxxii.

236] Frederick and Paul, Catherine and Leopold: Frederick the Great of Prussia, Czar Paul and Catherine the Great of Russia, and Leopold II of the Holy Roman Empire.

254] Plato. In the lines which follow, Shelley refers to the legend that Plato in his old age fell in love with a boy, whose name, Aster, is Greek for a star as well as for a particular (and short-lived) flower.

261] The tutor and his pupil: Aristotle and Alexander the Great.

283-84] The heirs of Caesar's crime from him to Constantine. Julius Caesar's crime was to undermine the Roman republic and prepare the way for the Roman emperors ("anarch chiefs" in 286), a procession of which up to Constantine Shelley now observes.

288] Gregory and John. "Gregory the Great is appropriate, as the true founder of the independent political power of the papacy. Which of many Johns is involved, there is no way of telling" (H. Bloom).

414] Lucifer: the Morning Star.

421-22] The soft note in which his dear lament the Brescian shepherd breathes. "The favourite song, 'Stanco di pascolar le peccorelle, [being weary of pasturing the little sheep], is a Brescian national air" (Mrs. Shelley's note).

439] Iris: classical goddess of the rainbow.

472] Him: Dante in *The Divine Comedy.*

544] Here the MS. breaks off.

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